

Chapter 2: The Planning Process

Photograph by Scott Sharkey



This CCP has been written with input and assistance from citizens, conservation organizations, and employees of local and state agencies. The participation of these stakeholders is vital and all of the ideas have been valuable in setting the future direction of the Refuge and the District. Refuge staff and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as a whole are very grateful to everyone who has contributed time, expertise and ideas throughout this process. We remain impressed by the passion and commitment expressed by many for the lands administered by the Refuge.

The CCP planning process began in October 1998 when a team comprised of Refuge staff, a regional planner, an employee of the Twin Cities Ecological Services Field Office, a representative from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and the Executive Director of the Friends of the Minnesota Valley were assembled. During the months of November 1998 to March 1999, the planning team reviewed the original Comprehensive Plan and associated documents. In addition, this group identified a number of issues and concerns that would likely affect the future of the Refuge and the

District. A list of required CCP elements such as maps, photos, and GIS data layers was developed. Concurrently, federal and state mandates plus applicable local ordinances, regulations, and plans were reviewed for application to this planning effort. Ultimately, the team agreed to a process for obtaining public input and for completion of the Refuge and District CCP.

Public input was obtained using several methods including open houses, issue-based focus groups, public use surveys, and personal contacts.

Open Houses

Seven open houses were conducted during the spring and summer of 1999. The primary purpose of the open houses was to obtain public input into the future direction of the Refuge and its District. These events also gave Refuge staff the opportunity to revitalize old friendships and develop some new ones. These citizens, non-profit organizations, and cooperating agencies were notified of the events via news releases, posters displayed in the various communities, the Refuge Calendar of Events, and direct mailings. Those unable to attend the open houses were encouraged to submit written comments using a pre-printed comment card or through regular correspondence. Many people who attended open houses gave the comment cards to friends, family, and colleagues. A total of 241 people attended the open houses and submitted 110 comment cards. We also received 21 letters in the mail.

- On March 31, 1999, an open house at the Refuge visitor center was held for non-profit organizations and local agencies. Its purpose was to share knowledge, identify existing or planned projects that may affect the Refuge and its District, establish face-to-face contacts, and to ask for feedback regarding the planning process.
- On April 27, 1999, a public open house was held at the Refuge visitor center in Bloomington, Minnesota.
- On May 6, 1999, a public open house was held at the Student Union, Mankato State University, Mankato, Minnesota.
- On May 11, 1999, a public open house was held at Carver Village Hall, Carver, Minnesota.
- On May 19, 1999, a public open house was held at the City Hall, Burnsville, Minnesota.
- On May 25, 1999, a public open house was held at the Don Ney Environmental Learning Center, Henderson, Minnesota.
- On August 24, 1999, a public open house was held at Bethel College and Seminary, Arden Hills, Minnesota. The primary purpose of this event was to obtain public input into the future management of the Round Lake Unit.

Issue-based Work Groups

Based in part on the input received from the open houses, the Refuge planning team decided to form issue-based work groups to discuss issues and obtain specific recommendations for the CCP. Members of these work groups were chosen by the planning team and were selected based on their interest, knowledge, and desire to participate in this process. Individuals from a variety of backgrounds served on these work groups, including technical experts plus county commissioners, avid hunters and anglers, volunteer rangers, bird watchers, environmental educators, city recreation directors, MnDNR employees, and Refuge staff. Each focus group was moderated by trained facilitators from the MnDNR or the Service's Regional Office. A brief description of their charge is summarized in the following paragraphs.

Refuge Recreational Uses. This 21-member group reviewed existing Refuge and District recreational activities in light of the six priority wildlife-dependent uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.

Threats and Conflicts. External threats and potential conflicts such as incompatible development and contaminants were addressed by this 21-member group.

Refuge Management and Biology. Ongoing habitat management activities plus associated biological monitoring programs were the primary topics of discussion for this 22-member focus group.

Refuge Expansion and Watershed Activities. This 20-member focus group concentrated on habitat restoration or protection opportunities beyond existing Refuge boundaries and out into the District.

Environmental Education and Interpretation. This 18-member group reviewed current environmental education and interpretive activities.

The Refuge hosted the initial meetings for the five focus groups on October 5, 1999, and October 19, 1999, at the Refuge visitor center. Between October and December 1999, each focus group convened from three to four times for two-hour meetings. Among other items, they provided feedback on the Refuge's mission, vision, and goals. In addition, each focus group developed several recommendations to help the Refuge and its District achieve their purposes over the next 15 years.

Meetings and Other Public Forums

In addition to open houses and focus groups, Refuge staff made presentations and solicited comments about the CCP from various clubs and organizations over the nearly 3-year planning process. In February 2000, the Refuge manager and a MnDNR representative spoke to more than 200 mountain bike enthusiasts at the Bloomington REI store concerning the issue of trail usage. Throughout the Spring of 2000 Refuge staff gave presentations to various clubs such as the Society of Professional Engineers regarding issues related to recreation and biology.

Public Use Survey

Minnesota River Valley Area Survey

In cooperation with the Refuge, Friends of the Minnesota Valley, and several other public and corporate sponsors, the MnDNR conducted a survey of public attitudes toward the Minnesota River Valley including recreational use, conservation and associated issues. This survey was distributed to 1,500 river-area residents during July and August 2001. The river was divided into five segments from Fort Snelling upstream to Le Sueur, thus surveys were mailed to residents of both rural and urban areas.

Preliminary survey results were available prior to publication of this Draft CCP. Final results and summaries should be ready prior to completion of the Final CCP. The planning team has reviewed our recommended objectives and strategies in light of the public attitudes revealed by the survey. The following are a few results that we found to be of interest:

- 73 percent of respondents strongly to moderately agreed, or were neutral, when asked if the government should buy land along the river for fish and wildlife habitat or public recreation.
- 74 percent of respondents strongly to moderately agreed there should be more effort to preserve fish and wildlife habitat in the area.
- Less than 3 percent of respondents thought that the level of effort to protect wildlife habitat was too aggressive.

- The most popular types of recreation activity in the area include nature/wildlife observation, hiking/walking, sightseeing, and visiting historic or cultural sites (35 percent to 55 percent of respondents participate).
- 59 percent to 69 percent of respondents strongly to moderately agree that opportunities for recreation, wildlife viewing, and learning about nature and history should be expanded in the area.

Preparation and Publishing of CCP

The Refuge and District CCP and Environmental Assessment (EA) were primarily written by Refuge staff with a great deal of assistance, review, and support from the Regional Office. It will be published in two phases and in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act. The Draft EA (Appendix A) presents a range of alternatives for future management and identifies the preferred alternative. A public review period of at least 30 days will follow release of the draft plan. Verbal and written comments received by the Service will be incorporated where appropriate and perhaps result in modifications to the preferred alternative or in the selection of one of the other alternatives. The alternative that is ultimately selected will become the basis of the ensuing final CCP.

Summary of Issues, Concerns and Opportunities

An array of issues, concerns, and opportunities were addressed during the planning process. Numerous discussions among citizens, focus group participants, resource specialists, and Refuge planning staff brought to light several recurring themes.

Refuge Recreational Uses

Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge provides a variety of wildlife-dependent recreational uses including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education and interpretation. To facilitate these uses, a system of parking lots, trails, and interpretive structures have been developed over the years. In addition, the Refuge has worked cooperatively with the MnDNR to establish and maintain the Minnesota Valley State Trail. Upon completion, the State Trail will transect several Refuge units as it meanders through the Minnesota River Valley between Fort Snelling State Park and the City of LeSueur.

Overall, many participants identified a need for greater public understanding and appreciation of the Refuge and District lands and the recreational opportunities they offer. This need can be addressed by several ways including enhanced communications through appropriate brochures, web sites, signage, visitor center exhibitry, and high quality recreational programming. A number of recreational issues became apparent during the planning process and deserve further discussion. Specific recreational concerns, issues, and opportunities are summarized as follows:

Elimination of Confusing Rules and Regulations

Due in part to the land ownership patterns within the Minnesota River Valley, there is a great deal of public confusion about what type of recreation is appropriate on Refuge lands and where this recreation is allowed. This perplexity is compounded by several issues including inconsistent use regulations among public land management agencies, lack of appropriate signs and brochures, a limited law enforcement presence, and the yet to be completed Minnesota Valley State Trail. It was recognized that the first steps toward addressing this very important issue are enhanced interagency coordination and a commitment by all public land managers to address this issue.

Completion of Minnesota Valley State Trail

As indicated previously, the Minnesota Valley State Trail has not been completed as originally planned. Although the MnDNR is making progress toward this end, several significant trail sections through Refuge lands await completion. To some degree, the absence of this multiple-use trail has led to some inappropriate uses of Refuge lands. For example, a myriad of informal and un-maintained trails have been established in several locations within the valley between Old Cedar Avenue and Lyndale Avenue. Likewise, the absence of bridges and trail crossings over streams and creeks has contributed to the development of numerous braided trails by those seeking access across these obstructions. Without an established and maintained trail, it has been difficult to restrict public use along this corridor and limit damage to adjacent fragile natural habitats.

There are several reasons why the Minnesota Valley State Trail has not been completed including limited funding, unwilling sellers of key tracts, and perhaps lack of public support. Its completion has also been recently complicated by a local debate over the proposed trail surface. More specifically, many mountain bike enthusiasts have expressed opposition to a hard surfaced and/or paved trail. Hardened trail surfaces were called for in the original Comprehensive Plan to provide access for elderly or disabled individuals.

We hope that preparation of this CCP will prompt a renewed effort by citizens, public agencies, private conservation organizations, and recreational users of the valley to place a high priority on the completion of the Minnesota Valley State Trail. Upon its completion, there is great potential for recreational users of this trail to develop an enhanced appreciation for the cultural and natural resource values of the Refuge as well as the greater Minnesota River Valley.

Continuance of High Quality Hunting and Fishing Opportunities

Although not endorsed by everyone, there was strong support among stake holders to continue hunting and fishing programs on Refuge and District lands. Consistent with requests to maintain these activities, the need to offer high quality recreational experiences to Refuge users was frequently expressed throughout the planning process. For example, public waterfowl hunting as it now occurs on Rice Lake is characterized by over-crowding and a great deal of competition between hunters. Likewise, this area is notable for hunting violations that occur each year including the killing of tundra swans, late shooting, and the use of lead shot. In this particular case, some people suggested improving the quality of this experience by initiating an adult hunter education program and limiting the number of hunters allowed to hunt Rice Lake at any one time.

Mountain Biking and Refuge Visitor Conflicts

A very vocal and organized mountain biking group expressed the desire to continue using much of the Minnesota River Valley for mountain biking. The rugged terrain and unde-

veloped landscape of the valley has attracted a growing number of bikers who use the new heavy-framed bikes designed to traverse rough and uneven terrain. With the exception of one semi-official trail established on City of Bloomington property, no mountain bike trails have been designated or developed in this area. As a result, some mountain bike enthusiasts took it upon themselves to establish a continuous trail between the Bloomington Ferry Bridge and Lyndale Avenue. Much of this single tract trail crosses both Refuge and private lands without authorization.

Several comments were received about the use of mountain bikes on Refuge lands and conflicts with other Refuge visitors. For example, bird watchers and nature photographers have encountered aggressive mountain bikers on Refuge trails. In many cases, these pedestrians were forced off hiking trails by these bikers. On a related issue, some people noted the excessive and unchecked erosion that currently exists in the Bloomington Bluffs area of the Refuge northeast of Lyndale Avenue. This natural resource degradation is due, in part, to improperly designed trails and off-trail usage by some mountain bikers.



USFWS File Photograph

Horseback Riding Issues

Horseback riding is currently limited on the Refuge to those portions transected by the Minnesota Valley State Trail and a small, unofficial trail around Fisher Lake on the Wilkie Unit. In light of the popularity of this activity, a number of equestrians attended the open houses to express their desire to maintain and possibly expand riding opportunities on Refuge lands. Most of the requests came from people who live upstream from Shakopee and who currently use portions of the State Trail for this pastime. Several individuals suggested that any new lands added to the Refuge allow for horseback riding.

Environmental Education and Interpretation

Several comments were received in support of the Refuge's existing environmental education and interpretive programs. Some people suggested program modifications or improvements through enhanced partnerships and cooperation with other agencies, non-profit organizations, industry and neighboring landowners. It was also suggested that new sources of volunteers could be developed to improve educational and interpretive programs as well as other Refuge activities. More importantly, many people suggested that a renewed effort to strengthen partnerships with schools throughout the area would greatly benefit the Refuge.

In 1992, a concept plan for the Refuge's environmental education and interpretive programs was developed along the theme of "How Should We Live Together?" This plan examined the need to convey the Refuge's unique identity and create a thought provoking interpretive experience for Refuge visitors. Among other items, this plan sought to link the various units of the Refuge with the visitor center through consistent messages.

Several recommendations were included in this plan, some of which have since been implemented. Prior to incorporating any major changes to Refuge environmental and interpretive programs, it is very important that this concept plan be reviewed, modified, and/or updated. Topics that should be addressed through this review include environmental education curricula and programming and their relevance to Minnesota public school graduation standards, interpretive and special events, preservation of Refuge's cultural and historical features, and replacement of visitor center exhibitry and onsite informational kiosks.

Refuge Biology and Habitat Management

A thorough understanding of the biological communities and their processes is fundamental to sound fish and wildlife habitat management. Many stakeholders understand this concept and consequently, several expressed a strong desire to enhance the capability of the Refuge biological program. Among other items, participants recommended a comprehensive inventory of the flora and fauna, especially rare remnant native plant and animal communities existing on Refuge and District lands.

The group acknowledged the importance of continuing Refuge and District habitat management programs such as prescribed burning and marsh management, consistent with well prepared habitat management plans. Future efforts should include plans for target species such as neotropical migrants and the control of exotic plant and animal species. It was also recommended that scientifically-based monitoring programs be designed and implemented to document changes in plant and animal communities in response to habitat management.

Refuge Land Acquisition and Watershed Activities

Many stakeholders understood that the health and vitality of many natural resource areas, including Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, is very dependent upon the overall health of its watershed. In light of this, the Refuge was encouraged to continue its work within the watershed of the Minnesota River in cooperation with many others. In particular, the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the acquisition of Waterfowl Production Areas and easements were believed to be very beneficial for a host of species and resource concerns.

Concurrent with the need to work within the watershed, many stakeholders suggested expanding the Refuge upstream by acquiring lands from willing sellers that would provide good quality wildlife habitat. Many suggested that adjacent hillside forest and bluff land should be acquired along with floodplain parcels to ensure long-term biological values of the Minnesota River Valley.

External Threats & Conflicts

Due to its urban location, the Refuge is subject to numerous threats and conflicts to its lands and natural resources. As the Twin Cities population increases, so does the demand to use any available open space for dissipation of noise, installation of utilities, and drainage of storm waters. Other potential conflicts include incompatible land use and development, toxic spills, and general degradation of the river and its watershed. Several stakeholders expressed their concern throughout the planning process about these

threats and conveyed their views about how they should be addressed. Although the Service, as an agency, only plays a minor role in all of these issues, it was believed that the Refuge needs to continue to cooperate and communicate with developers and city/county planners to avoid or minimize any potential threats.

Mosquito Control

Since 1988, the Refuge has prohibited treatment of its lands for mosquitoes except in the case of a health emergency. The policy was implemented after the Defenders of Wildlife and other environmental organizations filed a suit against the Service for allowing control of mosquitoes on Refuge lands. An out-of-court settlement was reached after the Service agreed to conduct an environmental review of its program. Following the completion of an environmental assessment and because of potential negative environmental effects, the Service adopted a policy that allows treatment on the refuge to occur only in the event of a human health emergency. Since the policy was adopted, there has not been a human health emergency associated with mosquitoes on the Refuge.

Maintenance of Refuge and District Infrastructure

The Refuge and its facilities are considered some of the finest in the area and most stakeholders believed that they needed to be maintained at a high standard. As acknowledged by many, the maintenance of the Refuge's infrastructure is one of the largest challenges facing an urban national wildlife refuge. A large amount of capital improvements including a state-of-the-art visitor center, 17 entrance signs, 12 parking lots, nine information kiosks, six historic structures, six bridges, 10 water control structures, two maintenance complexes, and miles of hiking trails all translate into significant maintenance needs. These facilities, combined with a relatively high level of vandalism, arson, dumping, and boundary encroachment, place excessive demands upon the Refuge's maintenance staff and its limited budget. Added to these responsibilities are nearly 5,000 acres of fee and easement lands scattered throughout the District.

Many stakeholders were surprised to learn of the small size of the maintenance staff and the Refuge's limited budget in light of all its maintenance needs. Others expressed a strong opinion that current Refuge staffing and budget levels are not sufficient to maintain these facilities. They further suggested that the Refuge, the Service, and its support within the community will erode if the current maintenance backlog is left unaddressed.